Traveling the Nepal Tourist Circuit: Kathmandu, Pokhara, and Chitwan

Most visitors to Nepal end up spending time in three places: Kathmandu, Pokhara, and Chitwan. Together these three destinations cover the best of what Nepal has to offer in terms of culture, mountains, and wildlife. Traveling between them is straightforward, and the journey itself is part of the experience.

Kathmandu: Where the Journey Begins

Almost every international traveler to Nepal arrives at Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu. The city is chaotic and fascinating in equal measure. The old neighborhoods of Thamel and Asan are full of temples, narrow lanes, and local markets. Durbar Square in the heart of the old city has palaces and temples dating back several centuries.

Outside the immediate city center, Boudhanath is one of the largest Buddhist stupas in the world and draws monks, pilgrims, and travelers from across the globe. Pashupatinath, on the banks of the Bagmati River, is one of the most important Hindu pilgrimage sites in South Asia. Visiting in the early morning or late afternoon gives you a better sense of the spiritual life of the place.

Allow at least two to three days in Kathmandu before moving on. A day trip to Bhaktapur is also worth adding to your itinerary since it gives you a sense of what a medieval Newar city looked like before modernization took hold.

Getting from Kathmandu to Pokhara

The journey from Kathmandu to Pokhara can be done by air in about 25 minutes or by road in 7 to 8 hours. Many travelers choose the bus for the scenery alone. The road follows the Trishuli River valley for much of the route, and on clear days you start seeing the Annapurna range as you approach Pokhara.

Tourist buses on this route are equipped with reclining seats, air conditioning, and onboard WiFi. Departure is usually in the early morning from Sorhakhutte, Kathmandu. Booking your seat in advance ensures you get your preferred position, window or aisle, and avoids the frustration of finding sold-out buses during peak season.

Pokhara: Mountains, Lakes, and Adventure

Pokhara feels completely different from Kathmandu. The pace is slower, the streets are wider, and Phewa Lake reflects the mountains on calm mornings in a way that is genuinely breathtaking. The Lakeside area has grown into a well-developed tourist district with restaurants serving food from around the world, trekking equipment shops, and boat rental stalls on the lake.

The main reason most people come to Pokhara is as a starting and ending point for Annapurna treks. The Annapurna Base Camp trek and the Annapurna Circuit are among the most popular trekking routes in the world, and both begin within a short drive of Pokhara.

For those who prefer day activities over multi-day treks, Sarangkot offers a sunrise view of the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri ranges that many travelers describe as one of the most memorable moments of their entire trip. Paragliding from Sarangkot is also extremely popular.

Getting from Pokhara to Chitwan

The bus journey from Pokhara to Chitwan takes around 4 to 5 hours. The road descends from the hills into the flat Terai lowlands, and by the time you reach Chitwan you are in a completely different landscape. Green fields stretch in every direction, the air is warmer, and the density of birdlife increases noticeably.

Chitwan: Jungle and Wildlife

Chitwan National Park was established in 1973 and became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984. It covers over 900 square kilometers of subtropical forest, grassland, and river habitat. The park is home to over 600 species of birds, one-horned rhinoceroses, Bengal tigers, gharial crocodiles, sloth bears, and a large population of Asian elephants.

Jungle safaris are usually done by jeep or on elephant back, though walking safaris with a trained naturalist guide are increasingly popular. Canoe rides on the Rapti River at dawn are a peaceful way to spot birds and crocodiles. The Tharu villages on the edge of the park offer a look at the indigenous culture of the region.

Most visitors spend two nights in Chitwan, which gives you one full day for safari activities and one morning or afternoon for other experiences before moving on.

Completing the Circuit

From Chitwan you can take a direct bus back to Kathmandu, which takes around 5 to 6 hours. Alternatively, some travelers fly back from Bharatpur Airport, which is a short distance from the park. Doing the circuit in the order of Kathmandu, Pokhara, Chitwan and then returning to Kathmandu is generally recommended because it avoids backtracking and makes the best use of the available road routes.

Baba Adventure Travels and Tours offers daily tourist bus services on all major legs of this circuit, including Kathmandu to Pokhara, Pokhara to Chitwan, and Chitwan to Kathmandu, along with vehicle rental and Nepal tour package options.